

Social Responsibility in Marketing for Online Gaming Affiliates

As the global economy and the market interests guide political decision-making, the topic of social responsibility by gambling companies has been taken up in public discussions across many different countries worldwide.

IN RECENT STUDIES conducted by our gaming research unit with online gamblers around the world, we found that many of them felt that responsible gaming practises demonstrate that a gaming operator has integrity, and that they care about their players' wellbeing. For instance, we published some research showing that online poker players did not want their winnings to come from problem gamblers who could not afford to lose it. This is an important message not only for gaming companies but also online gaming affiliates. Quite clearly, it is appropriate that all sectors of the gaming industry (including online gaming affiliates) need to advertise and promote its products and facilities. In this article, I briefly outline what online gaming affiliates should be thinking about and doing in relation to social responsibility, and why it is in their best long-term financial interest.

Comply with codes of practice

Online gaming affiliates should conform to all their country's codes of practice irrespective of whether the codes are mandatory or voluntary (e.g., the codes of practice by the advertising standards authorities, gambling commissions, etc).

Do not advertise or promote to vulnerable groups

One of the most important recommendations for online gaming affiliates is that they should not knowingly advertise and/or promote its products and services to vulnerable members of society. The most obvious group here are minors but can also include those with severe learning difficulties, the intoxicated, and problem gamblers.

Use demographic and contextual targeting in a socially responsible way

Companies like Google have clearly been very successful in using demographic and contextual targeting. Demographic and contextual marketing is another way to avoid promotion of online gaming to vulnerable groups. If done in a socially responsible way, the ability to market directly to the people who may be interested in an online gaming service (rather than marketing to everybody or the wrong type of person) is likely to lead to better conversion rates.

Provide the information to make an informed choice

Potential players should be given all the information they are likely to need to make an informed choice about whether they should click on a banner or link of an online gaming site.

Gaming site content and reviews should be genuine

Many may argue that content is king for online gaming affiliates, but that doesn't mean that affiliates' page content should be faked or hyped. Gaming site reviews should be genuine so that players can make an informed choice about which site they want to gamble on. Pithy one-liners are unlikely to translate to conversions for the affiliate. Naturally, there is a desire to want to say great things about the sites being promoted but sites should be reviewed critically highlighting the negatives as well as the positives (and preferably through the eyes of a player). This will lead to the perception of greater authority and establishes trust.

Design websites that are attractive, informative and non-exploitative

A critical part of the first stage of assessing trustworthiness of an online company relies on the design of the website. Studies have found that people can judge the visual attractiveness of a website within 50 milliseconds. A great website is more than just a home page, contact page and links. In order to attract viewers to a site, affiliates must give them a good reason to visit. Here, non-exploitative content is the key to gaining increased traffic flow (e.g., informative blogs, showcase articles, videos and podcasts, etc). Regular updating (say once a week) will also help repeat traffic.

Be selective and strategic

Many companies appear to make the mistake of advertising too many online gaming sites simultaneously from a variety of different affiliate programs. By affiliating with the most socially responsible online gaming operators, the affiliates' recommendations are more likely to be trusted by visitors to the affiliate site. In most commercial domains, 'name' brands are typically much more expensive than the same items without the brand

name. This provides an implicit assumption that better value can be found by avoiding the biggest and well-known names. When it comes to online gaming, this is not the best strategy. In the online business community, a high profile brand name equates with accountability. Many people worry that when they gamble on relatively unknown Internet gambling sites that operate out of Caribbean countries, they are not sure that they will see their money if they win. It may, therefore, be more strategic to be affiliated to well known companies who have a history of reputable gaming.

Be socially responsible to build customer loyalty and affinity

Successful online gaming affiliates need to establish and develop user loyalty and affinity. I would argue that being socially responsible and being seen to be socially responsible will help increase loyalty and affinity. A study carried out by the Online Publishers Association measured attitudes towards websites and online advertising. Their report concluded that the more that users felt an affinity and a sense of belonging with the website, the more favourable their attitude was towards a website's advertising. More specifically, high-affinity visitors, (i) spent more time at the site, (ii) were more positive towards the site and its content, and (iii) were more positive towards site advertising. If an online gaming affiliate site's visitors become loyal, conversion rate is likely to increase.

Clearly, social responsibility in gambling should adhere to ethical principles and is becoming a regulatory requirement in an increasing number of countries. Furthermore, it is expected by many gamblers who want to play with companies who show a high level of integrity. This is particularly relevant to online gaming where trust in the website and the operator is essential. Responsible gaming is about giving people the choice to play well designed games in a secure and supportive environment. Therefore, responsible gaming is not just an ethical or regulatory requirement – it is also good for business.

DR MARK GRIFFITHS is Professor of Gambling Studies at the International Gaming Research Unit of Nottingham Trent University. mark.griffiths@ntu.ac.uk